

AT THE VICARAGE.

X.

The Curate's wife and her two daughters and Mrs Jehoram were still playing at tennis on the lawn behind the Vicar's study, playing keenly and talking in gasps about paper patterns for blouses. But the Vicar forgot and came in that way.

They saw the Vicar's hat above the rhododendrons, and a bare curly head beside him. "I must ask him about Susan Wiggin," said the Curate's wife. She was about to serve, and stood with a racket in one hand and a ball between the fingers of the other. "He really ought to have gone to see her--being the Vicar. Not George. I----Ah!"

For the two figures suddenly turned the corner and were visible. The Vicar, arm in arm with----

You see, it came on the Curate's wife suddenly. The Angel's face being towards her she saw nothing of the wings. Only a face of unearthly beauty in a halo of chestnut hair, and a graceful figure clothed in a saffron garment that barely reached the knees. The thought of those knees flashed upon the Vicar at once. He too was horrorstruck. So were the two girls and Mrs Jehoram. All horrorstruck. The Angel stared in astonishment at the horrorstruck group. You see, he had never seen

anyone horrorstruck before.

"MIS--ter Hilyer!" said the Curate's wife. "This is too much!" She stood speechless for a moment. "Oh!"

She swept round upon the rigid girls. "Come!" The Vicar opened and shut his voiceless mouth. The world hummed and spun about him. There was a whirling of zephyr skirts, four impassioned faces sweeping towards the open door of the passage that ran through the vicarage. He felt his position went with them.

"Mrs Mendham," said the Vicar, stepping forward. "Mrs Mendham. You don't understand----"

"Oh!" they all said again.

One, two, three, four skirts vanished in the doorway. The Vicar staggered half way across the lawn and stopped, aghast. "This comes," he heard the Curate's wife say, out of the depth of the passage, "of having an unmarried vicar----." The umbrella stand wobbled. The front door of the vicarage slammed like a minute gun. There was silence for a space.

"I might have thought," he said. "She is always so hasty."

He put his hand to his chin--a habit with him. Then turned his face to his companion. The Angel was evidently well bred. He was holding up Mrs

Jehoram's sunshade--she had left it on one of the cane chairs--and examining it with extraordinary interest. He opened it. "What a curious little mechanism!" he said. "What can it be for?"

The Vicar did not answer. The angelic costume certainly was--the Vicar knew it was a case for a French phrase--but he could scarcely remember it. He so rarely used French. It was not *de trop*, he knew. Anything but *de trop*. The Angel was *de trop*, but certainly not his costume. Ah! *Sans culotte!*

The Vicar examined his visitor critically--for the first time. "He will be difficult to explain," he said to himself softly.

The Angel stuck the sunshade into the turf and went to smell the sweet briar. The sunshine fell upon his brown hair and gave it almost the appearance of a halo. He pricked his finger. "Odd!" he said. "Pain again."

"Yes," said the Vicar, thinking aloud. "He's very beautiful and curious as he is. I should like him best so. But I am afraid I must."

He approached the Angel with a nervous cough.

XI.

"Those," said the Vicar, "were ladies."

"How grotesque," said the Angel, smiling and smelling the sweet briar.

"And such quaint shapes!"

"Possibly," said the Vicar. "Did you, ahem, notice how they behaved?"

"They went away. Seemed, indeed, to run away. Frightened? I, of course, was frightened at things without wings. I hope---- they were not frightened at my wings?"

"At your appearance generally," said the Vicar, glancing involuntarily at the pink feet.

"Dear me! It never occurred to me. I suppose I seemed as odd to them as you did to me." He glanced down. "And my feet. You have hoofs like a hippogriff."

"Boots," corrected the Vicar.

"Boots, you call them! But anyhow, I am sorry I alarmed----"

"You see," said the Vicar, stroking his chin, "our ladies, ahem, have

peculiar views--rather inartistic views--about, ahem, clothing.

Dressed as you are, I am afraid, I am really afraid that--beautiful as your costume certainly is--you will find yourself somewhat, ahem, somewhat isolated in society. We have a little proverb, 'When in Rome, ahem, one must do as the Romans do.' I can assure you that, assuming you are desirous to, ahem, associate with us--during your involuntary stay----"

The Angel retreated a step or so as the Vicar came nearer and nearer in his attempt to be diplomatic and confidential. The beautiful face grew perplexed. "I don't quite understand. Why do you keep making these noises in your throat? Is it Die or Eat, or any of those...."

"As your host," interrupted the Vicar, and stopped.

"As my host," said the Angel.

"Would you object, pending more permanent arrangements, to invest yourself, ahem, in a suit, an entirely new suit I may say, like this I have on?"

"Oh!" said the Angel. He retreated so as to take in the Vicar from top to toe. "Wear clothes like yours!" he said. He was puzzled but amused. His eyes grew round and bright, his mouth puckered at the corners.

"Delightful!" he said, clapping his hands together. "What a mad, quaint

dream this is! Where are they?" He caught at the neck of the saffron robe.

"Indoors!" said the Vicar. "This way. We will change--indoors!"

## XII.

So the Angel was invested in a pair of nether garments of the Vicar's, a shirt, ripped down the back (to accommodate the wings), socks, shoes--the Vicar's dress shoes--collar, tie, and light overcoat. But putting on the latter was painful, and reminded the Vicar that the bandaging was temporary. "I will ring for tea at once, and send Grummet down for Crump," said the Vicar. "And dinner shall be earlier." While the Vicar shouted his orders on the landing rails, the Angel surveyed himself in the cheval glass with immense delight. If he was a stranger to pain, he was evidently no stranger--thanks perhaps to dreaming--to the pleasure of incongruity.

They had tea in the drawing-room. The Angel sat on the music stool (music stool because of his wings). At first he wanted to lie on the hearthrug. He looked much less radiant in the Vicar's clothes, than he had done upon the moor when dressed in saffron. His face shone still, the colour of his hair and cheeks was strangely bright, and there was a superhuman light in his eyes, but his wings under the overcoat gave him the appearance of a hunchback. The garments, indeed, made quite a terrestrial thing of him, the trousers were puckered transversely, and the shoes a size or so too large.

He was charmingly affable and quite ignorant of the most elementary facts of civilization. Eating came without much difficulty, and the

Vicar had an entertaining time teaching him how to take tea. "What a mess it is! What a dear grotesque ugly world you live in!" said the Angel. "Fancy stuffing things into your mouth! We use our mouths just to talk and sing with. Our world, you know, is almost incurably beautiful. We get so very little ugliness, that I find all this ... delightful."

Mrs Hinijer, the Vicar's housekeeper, looked at the Angel suspiciously when she brought in the tea. She thought him rather a "queer customer." What she would have thought had she seen him in saffron no one can tell.

The Angel shuffled about the room with his cup of tea in one hand, and the bread and butter in the other, and examined the Vicar's furniture. Outside the French windows, the lawn with its array of dahlias and sunflowers glowed in the warm sunlight, and Mrs Jehoram's sunshade stood thereon like a triangle of fire. He thought the Vicar's portrait over the mantel very curious indeed, could not understand what it was there for. "You have yourself round," he said, apropos of the portrait, "Why want yourself flat?" and he was vastly amused at the glass fire screen. He found the oak chairs odd--"You're not square, are you?" he said, when the Vicar explained their use. "We never double ourselves up. We lie about on the asphodel when we want to rest."

"The chair," said the Vicar, "to tell you the truth, has always puzzled me. It dates, I think, from the days when the floors were cold and very dirty. I suppose we have kept up the habit. It's become a kind of instinct with us to sit on chairs. Anyhow, if I went to see one of my



parishioners, and suddenly spread myself out on the floor--the natural way of it--I don't know what she would do. It would be all over the parish in no time. Yet it seems the natural method of reposing, to recline. The Greeks and Romans----"

"What is this?" said the Angel abruptly.

"That's a stuffed kingfisher. I killed it."

"Killed it!"

"Shot it," said the Vicar, "with a gun."

"Shot! As you did me?"

"I didn't kill you, you see. Fortunately."

"Is killing making like that?"

"In a way."

"Dear me! And you wanted to make me like that--wanted to put glass eyes in me and string me up in a glass case full of ugly green and brown stuff?"

"You see," began the Vicar, "I scarcely understood----"

"Is that 'die'?" asked the Angel suddenly.

"That is dead; it died."

"Poor little thing. I must eat a lot. But you say you killed it. Why?"

"You see," said the Vicar, "I take an interest in birds, and I (ahem) collect them. I wanted the specimen----"

The Angel stared at him for a moment with puzzled eyes. "A beautiful bird like that!" he said with a shiver. "Because the fancy took you. You wanted the specimen!"

He thought for a minute. "Do you often kill?" he asked the Vicar.